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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000649

SIPDIS

NSC FOR TSHANNON AND CBARTON
USCINSO ALSO FOR POLAD
STATE PASS USAID FOR DCHA/OTI

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA REFERENDUM UPDATE: 2/25/2004

REF: CARACAS 00503 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S. Shapiro for Reasons
1.5(b) and (d)

Summary:

11. (C) The National Electoral Council (CNE) announced February 24 that petition forms with more than one third of the signatures to petition the recall of President Chavez will be submitted to the CNE's Superior Technical Committee (CTS) for further review because they were filled in with the same handwriting. The OAS and the Carter Center issued a joint statement February 24 renewing support for a democratic process and calling on the CNE to reach a decision by the end of February. The Canadian Embassy in Caracas issued a statement February 20 reiterating support for the OAS and the Carter Center's on-going efforts. The European Union (EU) February 24 expressed "worry" at the CNE's delay in verifying the signatures. OAS Chief of Staff Fernando Jaramillo told the Ambassador February 25 pro-GoV CNE Director Rodriguez threatened to kick out the international observers if they pre-empted the CNE. Jaramillo said he anticipates more GoV delays, at least through March 18. End Summary.

CNE Sends Planillas to CTS for Review

12. (U) Francisco Carrasquero, president of the National Electoral Council (CNE), announced February 24 that 148,190 petition forms (planillas) will be submitted to the CNE's Superior Technical Committee (CTS) for further review. These forms represent roughly 1.3 million signatures of the 3.4 million submitted by the opposition seeking a recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez. The forms, the CNE said, are suspect because they contain some personal information filled out in handwriting different than the signature (so-called "planillas planas"), allegedly in violation of the CNE instructions.

13. (U) Pro-GoV CNE director Jorge Rodriguez told reporters February 25 that when the norms for the signature drive were discussed, the full CNE board was in agreement that every signer would have to fill in his or her own data. Rodriguez said that any signature forms with the same handwriting were therefore suspect. He refused to confirm a press report that the CNE was planning to start the process by which citizens can challenge the validation of their signatures on March 11, and reiterated that no signatures have been invalidated. Rodriguez rejected the statistical sampling system proposed by the OAS and the Carter Center, calling it was "statistically deficient."

Statements Supporting the Process

14. (U) The OAS and the Carter Center issued a joint statement shortly after Carrasquero's February 24 statement renewing support for a democratic process and calling on the CNE to continue reach a decision by the end of February. The Canadian Embassy also issued a statement February 20 quoting its Foreign Minister and reiterating the GoC's firm support for the OAS and the Carter Center's efforts to guarantee a "transparent, legitimate and peaceful" referendum process. The statement said the citizens' rights are paramount, and called on the CNE to adopt methods to ensure maximum citizen participation. (Note: A copy of the Canadian statement has been forwarded to WHA/AND). The European Union (EU) February 24 expressed "worry" at the CNE's delay in verifying the signatures, and called on the CNE to quickly fulfill its duties by February 28. The EU statement reiterated support for the OAS team of observers and referred to May 29, 2003 agreement between the GoV and the opposition to move forward with a constitutional process.

15. (C) On February 25, OAS Chief of Staff Fernando Jaramillo

told the Ambassador that he had objected to some changes that the Carter Center (including President Carter) had wanted to include in the OAS/Carter Center message, the OAS had been willing to make an independent statement, but compromise language was reached just before it was released. The Carter Center had wanted to release the statement before the CNE decision, but Jaramillo said CNE Director Rodriguez threatened to kick out the observers if they pre-empted the CNE. Jaramillo told the Ambassador that he does not see any will in the CNE to reach a decision on the referendum. Jaramillo anticipates more delays, at least through March 18.

16. (C) Jaramillo considered the statements by the EU and Canada very useful. He said he needs more support from countries for the OAS mission, though ruled out most other key players in the region. OAS Permanent Council President Durant's visit may not be a good idea now, Jaramillo said, especially since the Canadians issued a statement already. A statement from the OAS Permanent Council is not feasible.
SHAPIRO

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